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God Bless America

“God damn America!”

[...pause for effect...]

Of course, I don't really mean that.

But now that I have your attention, I want to ask you a question: what would you do if your rabbi gave a sermon like that?

Would you walk out in protest? Would you stay to hear him out, then let him have it after services? Would you try to see it from his point of view, since, after all, he officiated at your wedding and your children's b'nei mitzvah? Would you, perhaps, find that the message resonated with you, harsh as it is?

And what would each of these responses say about the kind of person you are, and the kind of religious faith you have, and the kind of policies you would support?

For many months now, there has been a national conversation about four Americans' answers to questions like these. They aren't your typical congregants, perhaps: they're running for the highest offices in the country. They are Barack Obama, Joe Biden, John McCain, and Sarah Palin.

And yet each of them is, on some level, just another churchgoer in the pew. Religious leaders and religious beliefs play a central role in their private and public lives.

The question I want to explore today revolves around my deep concern about where and how we as a society -- and as a Jewish community -- draw the line between personal faith and public life. On the one hand, don't we have a right to know and evaluate the doctrines and positions of our candidates and their spiritual guides? On the other hand, don't we value freedom of worship so deeply, especially as American *Jews*, that we would bristle at the thought of an outsider's criticizing our faith or practice?

To put it simply: can we be wholly committed to pluralism and fully protective of Judaism?

Before we start answering these questions, let's look back on four recent instances of confronting the boundary between personal faith and public life, and the lessons we might learn from them.

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First:

As Barack Obama's star was rising in the Democratic primary race, certain statements by his longtime pastor threatened his campaign's success. No doubt, we all remember the Rev. Jeremiah Wright controversy. Let me take a moment to refresh that memory, since it's been a whopping six months, which is an eternity in political time.

Rev. Wright's sermon excerpts were publicized first by ABC News in March 2008 and later by the rest of the mainstream media, bloggers, and YouTube. Among his tirades, he accused the government of lying: about the Tuskegee experiment, about Pearl Harbor, about 9/11, about the Iraq War. In each case, he claimed, the government deceived us.

About the violent attacks of 9/11 he echoed Malcolm X's infamous response to the JFK assassination: "America's chickens are coming home to roost." He explained that America's imperial policies abroad were to blame for the acts of terror at home. He reminded his parishioners that America killed far more people without batting an eye in Hiroshima and Nagasaki than the terrorists did in New York City. In his most famous rant, he repeated the refrain "God damn America" as he shouted a laundry list of the government's offenses against the African American community. Framing it all, he reminded his congregation that, unlike government, God never lies, never cheats, never murders, never changes.

The backlash was intense and immediate, and the media frenzy all-consuming. Obama denounced his pastor's comments, and within a month he left the church altogether, saying that such hateful, anti-American rhetoric was unacceptable. Obama then proceeded to give, in my opinion, a transcendent speech on race in America. At least as a news story, the Rev. Wright controversy seems to have faded mostly from view.

Wherever you stand on Rev. Wright's statements, the question arises: are we to judge Barack Obama -- and therefore all of Rev. Wright's congregants -- on the basis of these controversial excerpts from his sermons?

Second:

Senator Joe Biden's religious views have been in the news more than usual now that he is the Democratic candidate for Vice President. Because he is Catholic, his stance on abortion garners particular scrutiny. Biden states his position as personally opposed to abortion but unwilling to impose his particular religious belief on others through legislation. During the Democratic Convention, according to a Delaware Online news report, the Archbishop of Denver

“said Biden should not receive Communion because of his public support for abortion rights. Last fall, [that Archbishop] and other U.S. bishops published guidelines for voting -- *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* -- that call abortion ‘intrinsically evil.’ ‘We do not tell people how to vote,’ the bishops wrote... But the guidelines say a candidate's positions on anti-abortion matters could disqualify that person from a Catholic voter's support.”¹

A similar issue erupted into controversy in 2004 when a number of Catholic bishops refused Communion to John Kerry because of his pro-choice position.

Wherever you stand on abortion rights, the question arises: do religious leaders have the right to draw communal boundaries around political positions -- and do we have the right to criticize or praise them for it?

Third:

Republican Governor and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's religious life has also been the target of scrutiny, albeit less intense than that around Obama's.

Palin is a self-identified “Bible-believing non-denominational Christian.” She used to attend a Pentecostal Church; her former pastor there, Ed Kalnin, told churchgoers in 2004 that if they voted for John Kerry, he would “question [their] salvation.”² Later, the church issued an online clarification saying that he was “joking” when he suggested “Kerry supporters would go to hell.”

In August, Gov. Palin attended a talk at her regular church by a guest speaker, David Brickner, the founder of Jews for Jesus. He told those in attendance that terror attacks against Israel are manifestations of God's judgment against Jews who haven't embraced Christianity. As quoted in a CNN report, Brickner continued:

Judgment is very real and we see it played out on the pages of the newspapers and on the television. When a Palestinian from East Jerusalem took a

bulldozer and went plowing through a score of cars, killing numbers of people: Judgment -- you can't miss it.³
Gov. Palin's current pastor, Larry Kroon, when asked directly on CNN whether he agreed with Brickner's comments and whether Brickner would be invited back, said, "Yeah. He would be."⁴

In a press statement reported in the Anchorage Daily News, McCain campaign spokesman Michael Goldfarb said that Gov. Palin did not know Brickner would be speaking, and that Palin does not share the views he expressed. "She and her family would not have been sitting in the pews of the church if those remarks were remotely typical," Goldfarb said.⁵

Wherever you stand on Jews for Jesus and comments like Brickner's -- although I have a feeling I know where you stand! -- the question arises: Are we to convict a candidate as guilty by association, or trust the campaign's distancing and clarification?

Fourth:

The Republican Presidential Candidate Senator John McCain was embroiled in a religious controversy that emerged in the wake of his seeking the endorsement of John Hagee, a radically conservative Christian pastor. Hagee and his colleagues Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell infamously blamed both Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 on America's sinfulness, as manifest in gay marriage, abortion rights, and people refusing to turn to Christ.⁶ McCain has now condemned many of Hagee's positions and remarks; after first seeking his endorsement, McCain has been distancing himself from the controversial Christian firebrand.

Even more troubling to me was McCain's interview for Beliefnet in the fall of 2007.⁷ When asked about how a Muslim presidential candidate might fare, he said,
Personally I prefer someone I know has a solid grounding in my faith.
I just feel that my faith is probably a...better spiritual guidance. I just feel that that's an important part of our qualifications to lead....

And when asked whether the Constitution establishes a Christian nation, he went on to say:

I would probably have to say yes, that the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation. But I say that in the broadest sense. The lady that holds her lamp beside the golden door doesn't say, "I only welcome Christians." We welcome the poor, the tired, the huddled masses. But when they come here they know that they are in a nation founded on Christian principles.

I can't help but point out the irony in McCain's choice to quote the poem on the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of America's Christian soul. The poem from which those lines are taken, "The New Colossus," was written by Emma Lazarus, a New York City-born descendant of Portuguese Sephardic Jews who, in the late 1880s, helped train the masses of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in America to become self-supporting. I would guess that many of us here, myself included, owe a great deal to the fact that America's freedom of religion allowed our immigrant ancestors to prosper like no other time or place in Jewish history.

In October 2007, The Anti-Defamation League expressed their dismay over McCain's comments in an open letter.⁸ They urged McCain to withdraw his statements describing the United States as a "Christian nation" and "a nation founded on Christian principles."

McCain's response sought to clarify his earlier remarks, acknowledging that "people of all faiths are welcome here and entitled to all the protections of our Constitution, including the unfettered right to practice their religion freely..."

The ADL replied again with a mixed reaction, saying, in part "...We are disappointed that you did not expressly retract your statement that 'the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation...' We hope that you will express your commitment to our pluralistic values in more inclusive language in the future."

Wherever you stand on McCain's political platform and voting record, the question arises: how should we reconcile McCain's belief in America's Christian foundation, our belief in Judaism's legitimate place at the table of American religions, and our overarching belief in religious freedom which allows for others' beliefs that differ from our own?

* * *

The set of questions I have raised today touches on the role of clergy in congregants' political life and the role of private religious faith in candidates' public life. At a deeper level, all of these questions fall into the category of religious freedom, pluralism, and the future of faith groups in America.

This issue poses a special challenge to us as Reform Jews, for we embody the dichotomy between a commitment to a particular faith and a belief in religious pluralism. It's in our very label, "*Reform Jews*."

That we are *Jews* means we cast our lot with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Inheritors of thousands of years of tradition, we believe that our ancestors' legacy bears God's message about our people's special relationship with our Creator and our mission to act as God's agents in the world. Our holy text speaks in our people's ancient tongue to each generation, calling us into covenant with the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel and Leah.

That we are *Reform* means that we cast our lot with humanity. The lessons of history and our belief in moral behavior lead us to hope for a better future. We believe that, like us, all the peoples of the earth have inherited sacred traditions calling them into relationship with their Gods. Science and ethics speak in every human language to all who would listen.

In other words, we are religious pluralists. We embrace our own faith tradition while we also appreciate and even celebrate the faiths of others. To some, this might present an untenable contradiction. To us, it is a recipe for a rich life in the modern or postmodern world. As one Israeli scholar puts it, we aim for

spiritual inclusivity (recognition that different groups are capable of understanding the truth, albeit frequently in diverse ways), which logically leads to *ritual exclusivity* (or pluralism, namely that the existence of different religious approaches and ritual practices is both legitimate and desirable, and that there is no reason to seek to proselytize others).⁹

We welcome converts, of course, but we make no claim that our faith is the one true path to God, nor do we seek to impose our religious beliefs on others.

As religious pluralists, therefore, we bear what I call the Pluralist's Burden: that is, how do we respond to anti-pluralist, exclusivist faiths? Should we reject the beliefs and practices of those who reject ours? On the one hand, we espouse pluralism, and fundamentalism flies in the face of that belief. On the other hand, *we espouse pluralism*, so aren't we also bound to support other's rights to believe and worship as they choose, even if those beliefs contradict our own?

I think the answer, almost paradoxically, is "*D*," *all of the above*. We should be proud to be committed Jews, creating meaning in our lives through the learning and liturgy of our tradition and community. And we should be proud pluralists, protecting the freedom of our neighbors and fellow citizens to worship and live according to their conscience.

In public life, we should demand that our leaders uphold the Constitution's promise of separation of church and state. That bedrock principle of our democratic republic forms the foundation on which pluralism can thrive. A healthy religious pluralism is

the only assurance that our choice to live as Jews will remain safe and protected, and it also protects the choices of all those who practice other religions, or no religion at all.

If Barack Obama is the next president, it will be upon us to remind him that he called Rev. Wright's words "not only wrong but divisive... at a time when we need unity."

If Joe Biden or Sarah Palin is the next Vice President, it will be upon us to remind them of the view they seem to share, as described by Gov. Palin in December 2006:
I've honestly answered the questions on what my personal views are on things like abortion and a lot of controversial issues... I am not one to be out there preaching and forcing my views on anyone else.¹⁰

And if John McCain is the next president, then it will be upon us to remind him of his assurance to the ADL that he believes "people of all faiths are welcome here and entitled to all the protections of our Constitution, including the unfettered right to practice their religion freely..."

This message would be incomplete if it ended at broad national issues. Our commitment to certain values demands something from us locally, internally, as well. Just as we value pluralism on a national scale, we should promote pluralism even within the halls of our synagogues. In fact, let's be as strong and vocal in pluralism as others are in exclusivity and fundamentalism!

I'll start right now, with a small example. It's not my job to tell you how to vote; in fact, it's implicit in my job that I *not* tell you how to vote. Now, I may have pretty much made up my own mind on how I will vote on November 4, but I don't expect you to agree. In fact, I welcome a conversation about why we might agree or disagree on that position. I cannot stomach the idea of religious leaders stigmatizing or rewarding their followers for differing but legitimate political opinions. I prefer to discuss the issues and learn from each other.

Religious leaders and religious communities should foster healthy debate built on real relationships between members. We can build together a model of spiritual inclusivity and ritual exclusivity within these walls and within our families. We can be a paragon of pluralism to a country and world too often divided, violently, by religious conflict. We can show the skeptics what it looks like to be committed to our own faith as well as to the rights of others to practice theirs. If we remain faithful to each other, we can hold multiple truths in harmony.

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There is America-bashing, extremism, and fundamentalism on the left and the right. I believe we can chip away at these corrosive elements of American society by standing firm for what we believe -- which includes letting others believe as their consciences dictate.

In the early 1900s a Jewish American, Irving Berlin, wrote a patriotic tune by the name of "God Bless America." Unfortunately, that phrase has been exploited and exhausted by politicians, demagogues, and religious zealots.

In this new year, 5769, I'd like to reclaim it: *God Bless America!* Not as a statement of xenophobic nationalism, nor as a declaration of religious superiority, nor as an empty pandering sound-bite -- but rather as a sincere expression of prayer:

May God bless America with the courage to fulfill her potential.
May God bless America with leaders and citizens committed to religious liberty for all.
May God bless America as a land where differences are embraced as enriching.

May the new year be a year of many blessings for America; for our neighbors across oceans, across borders, and across the street; for our families; and for each of us.

And when we say and hear, "God bless America," let's remember that we are the ones who bear the God-given responsibility to make our lives a blessing to the Jewish people, to our nation, and to all humanity.

Shanah Tovah.

Notes

¹ <http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080831/NEWS02/808310389>

² <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/08/palin.pastor/>

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/08/palin.pastor/>

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqMCvq26d2M>

⁵ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/226/story/51952.html>

⁶ <http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2008/03/17/wright/>; see also <http://www.newsweek.com/id/135385>

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9izhjnaLa3M>

⁸ http://www.adl.org/religious_freedom/letter_mccainr.asp;

see also <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/2/27/155925/226/599/465189>

⁹ Jospe, Raphael. "Pluralism out of the Sources of Judaism: Religious Pluralism without Relativism," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (2007), pp. 92-113. A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College. <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol2/iss2/10/>

¹⁰ <http://www2.guardian.co.uk/uslatest/story/0,-7773715,00.html>